Save My Game

Time After Time … After Time

By Jason Nelson-Brown

I play with some of my friends every weekend, but when we actually get to sit down and play there doesn't seem to be a lot of time, and some of the smallest modules can feel like they take forever. Is there a better way to manage game time?

--Joshua, from AskWizards.com

You have a couple of problems here, but mostly they are tied to discipline and time management. One of the things we do when we play *D&D* is get together with friends. The game is not just about the game, so time that you spend socializing and playing is not wasted time; it is friend time and bonding time, whether you are discussing TV shows or movies or current events or sports or nothing in particular. Don't be too quick to pooh-pooh the value of the time spent at the gaming table that is not spent on gaming per se.

Still, you're there to play, so how do we address the time efficiency question? One thing is to realize that part of the issue is a product of the game and its evolution. Back in the olden days of *D&D*, the game was a lot simpler (although not necessarily more intuitive -- in fact, just the opposite), and adventures were a lot simpler. There were fewer calculations involved and relatively few options, making decisions easier (and therefore faster). In adventures, stat blocks were simpler, descriptions were simpler (when provided at all), plotlines were simpler, and so on. It was a game with fewer moving parts, so to speak (for better or for worse), so there were a lot less things that could go wrong or cause the game to hit a snag and bog down. You didn't have one player's turn taking 15 minutes to resolve in a combat, like with my high-level 3.5 psion character who has quickened this and psionic focus that and summoned minions through 3rd party supplements and on down the list. I say this to say that it's not all your fault. The game can take a lot longer than it used to, especially at high levels.

One solution is to get rid of complicated rules (like, oh I don't know, maybe GRAPPLING) and put simpler house rules in their place. This is a tricky road to navigate, because often your 'solution' will end up more complicated than the original, or you may find cases where the rule doesn't seem to work or doesn't make sense. This requires creativity on your part and some negotiation with the players to see whether there are rules that they don't like and would prefer to eliminate or change, but it could be a route to streamlining things.

In a similar vein, you can place a hard limit on the supplemental rules you use in your campaign. If you choose to allow every book under the sun, you shouldn't be surprised when a lot of time is spent consulting reference books or even needing to suspend the game to evaluate a new spell, feat, item, or rule application you've never heard of that just came out in the *Complete Whatever*

Guide. I'm not trying to dissuade you from buying new products, because there is a lot of cool stuff out there. But if time management is a problem in your campaign, you can save a lot of time by limiting extraneous material. If you are only using the main three core books, then you have a finite rule set for everyone to learn. Because it is finite, it can become familiarized and eventually almost automatized. It's like learning a multiplication table in elementary school -- pretty soon, you don't need to think about what 7x5 is; you just know it's 35. There is no calculation involved. You know the spells, the feats, the skills, the items, the rules. You know what they do and you don't have to waste a lot of time looking things up. Each extra book you add dilutes the mental energy you can focus on the core. You can't memorize everything you see, and sooner or later you will start forgetting stuff you thought you knew, besides not being able to retain the new things.

That advice is more for the start of a campaign (though you can reshuffle the deck mid-campaign if players are amenable). Because your game is already going, you are more in need of management tools for running things.

1. Respect the Clock

We all have things to do, we're all busy, so we understand that everyone can't be exactly on time to everything, especially a leisure activity, but please try to be respectful of everyone's time. If the game starts at 2:00, try to be there at 2:00. If you show up at 4:00, don't expect to be able to immediately jump into the action. Say hi and then let the others get back to the action while you wait for a convenient time for the DM to bring your character in, now that you're done 'examining the tapestries' and ready to game. If you have a dinner break from 6:00 to 6:30, don't start making your Hot Pockets at 6:28. If you run down to the store or the Subway or whatever, get what you want and get back promptly.

2. Time Out for Arguments

Recent columns have suggested using an egg timer for dealing with arguments during play. Whatever system you use, allow one to three minutes for rule challenges or arguments, make your DM judgment call, and get back to the game. Further discussion can happen at dinner or between game sessions.

3. Be Ready for Your Turn, but Pay Attention Even When it's Not

This should go without saying, but players need to focus on what is happening in the game so that you don't need to recap what just happened. Sure, things can change from round to round, but you should have a good idea of the two or three things you are most likely to do *before* your turn starts. Then, when you're up, you're ready to go. If you have spells or feats to look up, do it on other people's turns (while keeping one eye on the action) so you're ready.

You could have a time limit on turns. That's not completely fair, because some kinds of characters have more complicated action sequences than others, and you might have cohorts or animal companions or summoned monsters, but be reasonable. If you can't explain what your character is doing for the next six seconds and resolve the action in three minutes (maybe five tops), you need to work on your playing skills. It is perfectly fair for you to declare that a particular PC is delaying and skip to the next person in initiative order if a player isn't ready to go when their turn comes up.

As a side note for laptop users, unless your character has been killed or knocked out of action with no reasonable chance to get 'fixed' during a combat, please -- no web-surfing or game-playing while the game is going on. It's not only rude but has the potential to distract other players (especially those sitting next to you).

4. Clear Tables Lead to Clear Minds

Try to keep the playing surface relatively free of clutter. Keep your chips and snacks and whatever off the table, and the same with your stack of gaming books, backpack, laptop, and the rest of your stuff. The only things on the table should be figures and a mapsheet (if you use them), dice, and maybe a beverage (the one you're actually drinking from, not a stack of empty soda cans). Visual clutter blocks your view of the action with miniatures, interferes with rolling dice, and is a distraction besides.

5. Avoid Wandering Monsters

Yes, random encounters can keep PCs on their toes and burning off resources, but they rarely advance the central plot. Creatures from within the adventure on patrol? That's fine. Random vermin, wild animals, or menacing predators? Those are good every once in a while to give flavor to the wilderness or the underground, but in general, these are time sinks that delay completion of your adventure.

6. Be Prepared

Yes, this means you, Mr. DM. If you are using rules with which you are not perfectly familiar, have your reference books out and ready. Bookmark the *Monster Manual* or the SRD for the monsters you're going to use. If you want players to keep on top of time, lead by example.

About the Author

Jason Nelson-Brown lives in Seattle with his wife Kelle, daughters Meshia and Indigo, son Allen, and dog Bear. He is an active and committed born-again Christian who began playing *D&D* in 1981 and currently runs one weekly campaign while playing intermittently in two others.

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